

Thematic Field B: Welfare State, Inequality and Quality of Life

Field Chairs: Prof. Dr. Karin Gottschall, Prof. Dr. Heinz Rothgang

Field Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Matthias Wingens

BIGSSS' Thematic Field B integrates macro, meso and micro level research, and focuses on the connection between social policies, patterns of inequality, and collective and individual well-being. Since the beginning of the 1990s, welfare states around the world have faced enormous challenges. Mass unemployment, aging populations, intensified international competition, and increasing public deficits all compete for and threaten to overwhelm welfare state resources and structures. To this background welfare state regimes are being transformed and the welfare state's central role in government has been called into question. Traditional social policies were designed to deal with social risks in an industrial society and based on a male bread winner model, but as economies shift from manufacturing to knowledge-based, manual labor ceases to be the dominant form of employment, education moves center stage, family structures and gender roles are changing and traditional industrial society class structures are altered. The result has been a resurgence of economic and social inequality and the emergence of new forms of insecurity in advanced industrial societies, with massive implications for collective and individual well-being.

Research questions in Thematic Field B fall into three groups:

1. How are European welfare states being affected by globalization, Europeanization, labor market changes, labor market flexibilization, and new socio-economic and demographic patterns? What major transformations are underway? What new welfare state paradigms can we identify (e.g., activist social policy, welfare as social investment, welfare markets, recommodification, conditionality) and which policy objectives and instruments do they emphasize?
2. What impacts have changes in social policy had on social integration and inequality affected by globalization? How have inequalities in income, health, living conditions, education and other spheres of life changed over time? Is the welfare state still able to perform its central role of alleviating inequality, poverty and deprivation? What effects does the marketization of welfare provision have on social inclusion? How does welfare-state reform affect living conditions and quality of life in different societies? And, how, in turn, do particular social groups and their preferences influence policy change?
3. How are changing social structures and welfare state reform affecting the quality of life? Is the quality of life as determined by both objective and subjective indicators of wellbeing on the decrease among the inhabitants of

OECD countries? Are low-income sectors of the population more susceptible than others so that inequities in living conditions and subjective well-being are also increasing, or are the middle classes equally affected? From a life course perspective, does the traditional U-shaped curve for life satisfaction, where the youngest and the oldest are most satisfied, still hold true?